

It would be difficult not to know that Christmas is happening. The shops filled with Christmas fare, the decorations, lights and Christmas trees, the excitement as the holiday approaches with all the parties and the feasting.

The first Christmas must have been pretty hard to ignore for the shepherds too, what with the angelic announcement and the entire angel host singing. The story conveys the sense of excitement and eagerness, for we are told, that their immediate reaction was “lets us go and see!!!”

By contrast Epiphany is a much quieter event. Scholars suggest that the arrival of the wise men took place several months after Jesus birth, not twelve days, as the church calendar would indicate.

It is traditional to take down the trappings of Christmas, the decorations, cards and Christmas trees on 12<sup>th</sup> Night which is the Feast of the Epiphany. The splendour of Christmas is packed away and we are left with the ordinary everyday things.

If Christmas is about announcement, expectation, excitement, and rejoicing, Epiphany is about discernment, perseverance, searching and recognition.

The shepherds came to the stable from the local hill side immediately following the angel's announcement and spontaneously fell and worshiped.

The wise men came after long preparation and a lengthy journey. They brought precious earthly gifts; the things they thought would be appropriate presents for an infant King whom they expected to find in a grand palace surrounded by riches but instead they were led to Bethlehem.

Their precious gifts became a means through which we comprehend nature of Christ.

They gave Gold - here for us is a recognition of his kingship not of an earthly realm but of the kingdom of heaven.

Frankincense speaks to us of his priesthood,  
and myrrh foretells his death for our redemption.

In the Collect for this past week we prayed the words “grant that, as he came to share in our humanity, so we may share the life of his divinity;”  
Words which are echoed as the water is added to the wine in the chalice in preparation for the communion.

“By the mystery of this water and wine grant that as you partook of our humanity we may be partakers in your divinity”

Here in the gifts of the wise men Christ’s true identity and purpose are made known.

But there is more, for what the angels proclaimed in Bethlehem to Jewish shepherds is found and recognised by gentiles from afar.

Nearly 400 years ago Lancelot Andrewes preaching before King James 1 said this, “There came from the East wise men, Gentiles; and that concerns us for so are we.”

Here in this coming unannounced, except by the silent moving of a star, is made known the truth that Christ came for all humanity, that we, his fallen creation might be brought back into a right relationship with God. This truth is brought home in one of my favourite post communion prayers “Father of all, we give you thanks and praise, that when we were still far off you met us in your Son and brought us home.” In a similar way the Eucharistic prayer proper preface for Christmas reminds us “In him we see our God made visible and so are caught up in the love of the God we cannot see.” And that is what Epiphany is about - the recognition of our God in Jesus Christ our Saviour.

As the wise men came searching we also make our journey to find the King of Kings. Looking, longing, expecting, we come to learn that we are accepted and loved what ever our race, colour, or gender wherever we have come from.

In first century Palestine there were different reactions to Christ's birth The first was the reaction of Herod. Matthew tells us he was frightened. The challenge to his position as ruler causes the tyrannical King to feel threatened and this precipitates in the people a fear of his inevitable reaction. A threatened king is a dangerous king and Herod was afraid,

afraid that his way of life, his power and influence would be endangered and possibly even usurped by this new king.

He called the leaders of the Jewish people together, the Scribes and chief priests and consulted them about this “king of the Jews” about which the wise men spoke. Their reaction was to answer his questions with quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures, but they failed to recognise the significance of the news or see that this infant was the long awaited Messiah come at last in fulfilment of the prophecies.

Then there were the wise men themselves. They had journeyed far in their quest to find the King and were not to be deterred in their search.

Having not found what they were looking for in the place they expected, they moved on, with the star to guide them, until they came to the place where the infant Christ lay. They journeyed into the unknown to encounter the unexpected but when they eventually arrived, they recognised that in the baby in the manger they had found what they had been searching for, and they fell down on their knees and worshiped.

Three different reactions to the birth of Jesus two thousand years ago!

Yet today the reactions are not so different. Confronted with the story of the incarnation, contemporary society responds in a very similar ways.

There are those who like Herod, are so concerned with their own self importance that they cannot see beyond their own desires and position in society and feel threatened by anything which might affect their comfortable, self indulgent and often complacent way of life. Anything which might jeopardize this is to be vigorously resisted.

Then there are those who do actually know the story, they have heard it every year since they were children yet it means nothing to them. They put

up the tree, write their cards, pack up and distribute the presents; strip the supermarket shelves like a swam of locusts, then eat and drink too much over the subsequent days, and if they do think of the reason behind it all, it is of a sentimental story of a baby which is consigned to the category of a fairy tale. Their attitude to the wonder of the incarnation is one of apathy and indifference.

The story of the wise men reminds us that there is another response to the coming of God's son. It is the wonder of true recognition of the tiny human baby as the King of Kings. The Son of Mary, as the Son of God. Completely human and wholly divine. And that is what Epiphany is all about. It is recognising Jesus for who he is and responding with worship and

adoration. The wise men knelt before the infant Jesus and gave him, the best of all they had to offer.

Can we who know the rest of the story respond with anything less?